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Dream vs. Thought

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Sonia tends to remember her dreams well. She always thinks her dreams are interesting. Sometimes, when she wakes up at night in the middle of a dream, she goes right back to sleep to enjoy the continuation of that dream. She even has a dream journal kept for the last several years. And she happens to be a psychologist and experienced meditator. So, she has something to share with us about what she thinks about dreams.

Sonia: I enjoy my dreams immensely. But what I want to say the most today is that our thoughts are actually not that different from dreams. The main difference is we dream when we sleep and we think when we are awake. While there is very little external constraints in dreams, our thoughts are heavily constrained by all sorts of real-world stimuli.

I came to this realization not from my psychological work, although which was helpful. I learned more from my meditation experience. Through over a decade of meditating for one to two hours almost every day, I gained surprising insight into how thoughts work. Of course, this has been being told by Buddhist monks and other serious meditators for thousands of years. But it is this, my own experience which made this realization real.

Regarding meditation, my journey was not easy, straightforward, or effortless. It was a winding, back-and-forth, and slow process. But now, when I sit and meditate, my mind becomes clear. I can concentrate on the breath. I can detect virtually all the stimuli entering into my mind. This includes sounds, bodily sensations, and mental activities. Whenever there is a stimulus, my mind tries to process it. After long practice, I think I can now detect basically all the "sparks" which ignites when there is a stimulus. When I started meditation, each such spark had a huge impact on my mind. My mind raced to create all

sorts of residual "thoughts." As a results, my concentration was distracted. Nowadays, whenever such a spark ignites, I can detect it and return to the focus, usually the breath. The interesting part is that the meta-process of overseeing all these happenings also works in the same way. So, when a spark ignites, this actually triggers the executive process. That is, when we realize that this executive process also ignites its own spark and works just like a distraction. Only when we realize this and the fact that there is nothing else is going on, we really know what is happening in our minds.

Once we gain the ability to do this, it is also possible to do the same outside meditation. We can detect all the stimuli that trigger sparks. In an everyday life, we need to function. This requires us to "react" based on those sparks. But in reality, there are millions of sparks igniting all the time. All these sparks ignite different processes. And these processes mutually constrain one another. As a result, there will only be certain outcomes that (normally) match the reality. This is what is happening when we are awake. Our thought process is just a part of it. A lot of thought processes are triggered by mental activities, even without external stimuli. Our thoughts develop only within the existing constraints. There are millions of these even when we are awake. But then, there are a lot of constraining stimuli. So, most of "wild" thoughts may not realize in our minds. But only with a strong meditative ability, we can get a glimpse of all these.

On the other hand, when we sleep, there are much less external stimuli. There are very few constraints. So, these millions of mental stimuli can run wild. I enjoy their wild run.

Summing up, I repeat my point that our thoughts are just reality-constrained dreams. Unless we realize this point, we are essentially living in a dream. A surprise?